

# Workers check for storm runoff, sewer-line breaks

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The winter's first gully-washer brought much-needed rain, but it also fouled local waters with polluted urban runoff and increased the risk of sewage spills.

To address both problems, a small army of city workers scrambled into action at the splash of the first raindrop.

The front line of this storm brigade is the enforcement officers who check construction sites for erosion controls.

Nearly two dozen citations were issued within the city of San Diego last week to property owners at building sites where erosion controls were not installed in advance of the storm.

But with 1,200 construction sites countywide, erosion-control inspectors can only cover so much territory. That is why the city spent nine months training its 13,000 workers to recognize sewer-line breaks and storm-water pollution violations.

"It's a huge cultural change we're going through in the city," said Deborah Castillo, spokeswoman for the city's storm-water pollution prevention program.

The Metropolitan Wastewater Department also has redoubled its efforts to reduce sewage spills through more vigilant inspections of urban canyons, where erosion can trigger catastrophic pipeline breaks.

The city even utilizes its police helicopter unit. When airborne officers are not on patrol or responding to an emergency, they use infrared scopes to check urban canyons for signs of sewer breaks. Sewer water is noticeably warmer than runoff or stream water.

In addition, the city determined that it could reassign building inspectors and street-division workers previously left idle during rainstorms to become storm-water and flood-control inspectors.

Bolstered by a municipal work force better educated on urban-runoff pollution, the city's storm-water enforcement program is more effective than ever, officials said.

"We've had a number of significant violations called in by city employees," Castillo said.

At the height of Wednesday's storm, the city's five storm-water inspectors fielded dozens of calls, many from city employees, that resulted in citations issued to construction sites with ineffective erosion controls.

While most people don't think of silt as a pollutant, soil eroded from construction sites can have devastating effects on the ecosystem when it smothers life on the bottom of creeks and rivers.

Since December, the city has issued stop-work orders at 15 construction sites where storm-water controls were not properly installed, said Karen Henry, chief of the urban-runoff program.

"The city previously was reluctant to do that, but we now shut down construction sites that are severely deficient," Henry said.

The city's tougher enforcement at construction sites is a result of pressure by state inspectors from the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board who monitor cities' compliance with regional storm-water regulations, she said.

"I think the city is doing a superb job," said John Robertus, the board's executive director. "They are abating pollution in significant amounts."

The city also has made progress curbing major sewage spills that in previous years occurred during heavy rainstorms.

In anticipation of winter rains, crews from the Metropolitan Wastewater Department cleaned sewer pipes in 35 of 45 urban canyons, department spokesman Michael Scahill said.

"There haven't been any beach closures as a result of sewer spills this winter," Scahill said.

Metropolitan Wastewater inspectors last week focused their attention on sewer lines in 22 "high priority" canyons where breaks are most likely to pollute rivers, bays or the ocean, Scahill said.

Sewage spills last month were the lowest for the month of January in four years. There were 18 spills citywide this January, compared with 24 in the same month last year. There were 27 spills in January 2001 and 44 in the same month in 2000.